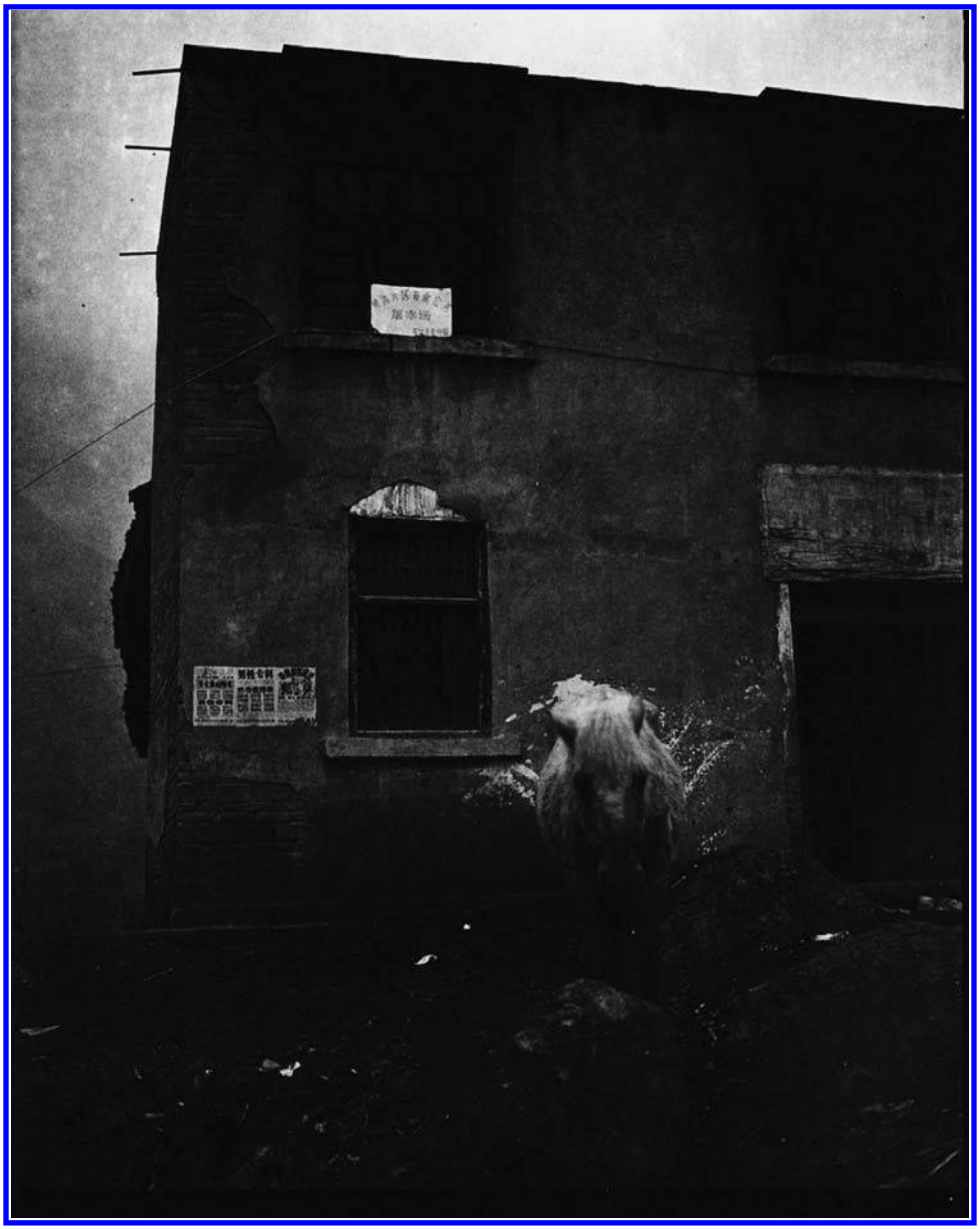


Adou. Horse, Building. *2006.*
Courtesy of M97 Gallery, Shanghai.

Photographic Ecologies*

WILLIAM SCHAEFER

From the flat, decaying surface of a wall, the form of a horse emerges from a spray of liquid. Its legs are barely discernible from the murky ground of the darkly printed photograph: They are planted among three overlapping boulders, while the ground to the left is strewn with white and gray flecks and patches, apparently trash. The horse's shaggy hair and ears are blurred slightly from the slow shutter speed of the camera in the dim light, as if the horse were still taking form. Paradoxically, every drop of the spray the horse seems to be shaking off its body appears clearly visible, in flight, as if captured by a rapid shutter speed. But, the viewer realizes, this is just a trick of the flattening of the perspective from which the photograph was taken: The spray is white paint splattered on the sharply focused wall of the building behind the horse. Much of that wall, which parallels the picture plane like a screen, is mottled with age. Along the building's left edge, traces of liquid drip down the wall, staining a patch of raw plaster where the skin of the building has been torn away to reveal the bricks beneath. Iron bars are barely visible in the dark windows on the left, while the window and door on the right are as black and formless as the eyeless patches on the horse's face. Attached to the upper-left window, a stained sign is scarcely legible but for three characters: 屠宰场 (*tuzaichang*): slaughterhouse. And while the sky and mountain slope behind are as mottled as the wall's surface, the curved and jagged area of darkness on the left edge of the building, perhaps an outcropping of foliage, appears like a

* I am grateful to Rong Rong for a gracious and thought-provoking discussion as well as an informative visit to Three Shadows Photography Center in Beijing, which were indispensable for this essay and the larger project on contemporary Chinese photography of which it is a part. Steven Harris and the staff of M97 Gallery in Shanghai very helpfully made available essential materials. I am also very much indebted to Joanne Bernardi of the University of Rochester, Jean-Louis Bigourdan and Douglas W. Nishimura of the Image Permanence Institute of Rochester Institute of Technology, Greg Miller of Film Rescue International, and Taina Meller and Mark Osterman of the George Eastman House for generously giving their time, in person and via email, to detective work about the visible artifacts of expired and decaying film. Sabrina Carletti, Prasenjit Duara, Rachel Haidu, Andrew F. Jones, Julia Adeney Thomas, Eugene Wang, and an anonymous reader for *October*, as well as students, colleagues, and audiences at Binghamton University, Duke University, Durham University, Harvard University, Syracuse University, the University of Rochester, and Zhejiang University, challenged and brought to visibility my arguments in this essay. I am deeply grateful to all, and am alone responsible for all errors and misjudgments.

gash in space. It is as if the mountain and sky were a torn backdrop, a pictorial surface opening into nothingness.

The photograph, *Horse, Building*, is one in a series, *Samalada*, by the Sichuan-based photographer Adou, who came to prominence as part of a group exhibition entitled *Wai Xiang / Outward Expressions, Inward Reflections*, held in 2008 at the Three Shadows Photography Art Centre in Beijing. Over the past decade, Three Shadows, co-founded by photographer Rong Rong and his Japanese wife and collaborator, Inri, has become a focal point for the display of experimental photography in China. The work shown there is highly diverse—from the most intimate and personal to the historical to the abstract. But for a group of contemporary Chinese artists, including Rong Rong, Adou, Zhang Jin, Xing Danwen, Chu Chu, and Zi Bai, I want to argue, photography is a key site for staging and rethinking fundamental questions of the relations between culture and nature, landscape and ecology, as they intertwine with the politics of space and place in China—and thus for learning to picture, with fierce precision, the Anthropocene, the epoch in which the human becomes the primary ecological and geological force. The work of these photographers is contemporaneous with a renewed philosophical inquiry into the relations between culture and nature in China and elsewhere, such as Jiang Yuhui's recent reconsideration of Chinese landscape painting from the perspectives of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, cognitive science, and environmental aesthetics.[1] But most of all, their work is driven by their engagement with the intertwined conditions of the present historical moment, a time of massive displacement and migration of people from the country to the cities, from the hinterlands to coastal regions; rapid urbanization and urban nostalgia for the countryside and "native soil"; and widespread, catastrophic environmental degradation.[2] In their various inquiries, most of these photographers insist on using film as a departure from digital photography—making film, as it were, a post-digital practice—even as the digital forces them to rethink the medium of analogue photography. Because of the scale and severity of environmental degradation and population density and displacement in China, the work of Zhang Kechun, Zhang Jin, Xing Danwen, and Adou, among others, goes well beyond an investigation of the nature of photography; it has become a harbinger of global futures, a kind of test case of how to picture the Anthropocene and the questions it poses regarding the nature of nature and the relations of human and nature.

The photographs Adou and other Three Shadows artists are producing can be understood as not merely depicting the environment; rather, for these photographers, the materiality and forms of photographic images emerge from the interactions of ecological processes and thereby allow the human to be seen as one among many contingent actors within such processes. For instance, the horse in Adou's pho-

1. Jiang Yuhui, *Hua yu zhen: Meiluo-Pangdi yu Zhingguo shanshui huajing* [Painting and truth: Merleau-Ponty and Chinese landscape paintings] (Shanghai: Renmin chubanshe, 2013), p. 4.

2. On current Chinese documentary photography as a medium for thinking rural displacement and urban nostalgia, see my "Poor and Blank: History's Marks and the Photographies of Displacement," *Representations* 109 (2010), pp. 1–34.

tograph at first glance seems to stand in uneasy relation to its environment, nearly indiscernible from the human-built structure with its imposing face and sinister signage behind it, and isolated by the building from the open spaces of mountains and sky beyond. And yet the mottling of the building's wall makes it appear to be of the same substance, albeit a darker shade, as the mottled sky. Strictly speaking, sky and wall do share a common substance: that of the film that depicts them. This commonality of materiality and depiction is, of course, true of any photograph—and, for that matter, any medium—but it is a commonality much photography works hard to render invisible, as if the medium were transparent. One of the distinctive features of the *Samalada* project is Adou's insistence on the visibility of the substance of photography by using expired film. At the time he shot these photographs, this film was already twelve years past its expiration date and had been kept in unknown conditions with, it seems, little control of humidity or temperature. At first, Adou recounts, he used expired film because it was cheap; but the film's unpredictable artifacts quickly became part of his project's aesthetic.[3] Such photographs, with their decaying surfaces, at once document and dissolve the boundaries of their subject matter. In the present photograph, the horse seems both to emerge from and merge with the wall, shaking with blur and the fluid forms of life; the building, marked by death, cracks and crumbles; but the entire film surface, as its emulsion decays and its silver particles degrade with age, pulses with life: vibrant matter, to use Jane Bennett's evocative term.[4] Despite the sharp focus of the camera's lens, the smudged, blotched, and mottled film dissolves the distinctions between persons, animals, and plants, human artifacts and natural forms, and building, earth, and sky depicted in the photograph.

A number of the images in Adou's *Samalada* series seem to evoke ethnographic photography, particularly those that explore the life of the Yi ethnic minority of the Daliang Mountains in Sichuan province, southwestern China. The Yi have had a long history of being what might be called photography's ethnic other in China, whether subjected to primitivist ridicule, as in a photograph featured on a full page in the renowned illustrated magazine *The Young Companion* (Liangyou huabao) in 1934, or to more sympathetic documentation by the photographer Zhuang Xueben, who, during the 1930s, "captured the life and customs" of the Yi in the photographs for which he became known.[5] The reintroduction of Zhuang Xueben's work to a contemporary audience over the past decade has provoked a variety of reflections on ethnographic

3. M97 Gallery, "An Interview with Adou," in *Adou* (Shanghai: M97 Gallery, 2013), p. 132.

4. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

5. Zhang Li, "Nei xiang de 'wai xiang'" / "'Outer Expressions' of the Inner Self," in *Wai xiang/Outward Expressions, Inward Reflections* (Beijing: Three Shadows Press, 2008), p. 8 in Chinese text, p. 11 in English translation. All further references to this volume cite the Chinese text first, English translation second. I have at times modified the translation to bring it closer to the Chinese text. On primitivism, photography, and modernism in early-twentieth-century Chinese print media, see my "Shanghai Savage," in *Shadow Modernism: Photography, Writing, and Space in Shanghai, 1925–1937* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), pp. 180–220.

Adou. Funeral, Men. *2006*.
Courtesy of M97 Gallery, Shanghai.

photography. An article appearing in a special issue of *Chinese Photography* (*Zhongguo sheying*) in 2002 devoted to Zhuang's work makes a rather familiar argument for the importance of ethnographic photography for preserving "disappearing traditional cultures," especially of what the article calls "backwards ethnicities," in the face of modernization, an argument that the article couples with a faith in "veracity" (*zhenshixing*) as the guiding principle of ethnographic photography.[6] The authors, the anthropologists Zhang Jianghua and Wang Zhaowu, write, "When taking photographs, it is not permissible for the photographer to interfere in the natural setting of the photographed object [*duixiang*], and it is not permissible to manipulate the photograph."[7] Interference with the "other" and its "natural setting" is here equated with the manipulation of the photograph itself. Writing in the same issue of *Chinese Photography*, however, the anthropologist and activist Xiao Liangzhong reminds his readers that there is no objectivity to be found in ethnographic photography, arguing instead that "true natives [*zhenzheng de tuzhu*] lose their voice, and even hide their bodies," when an encounter between photographer and the photographed is "not mutually negotiated"—a notable exception, Xiao writes, being Zhuang Xueben's work from the 1930s.[8]

6. Zhang Jianghua and Wang Zhaowu, "Zhuang Xueben zaoqi minzuzhi sheying de renleixue shang de jiazhi" [The Anthropological Value of Zhuang Xueben's Early Ethnographic Photographs], *Zhongguo sheying* [Chinese Photography] (February 2002), p. 26.

7. Zhang and Wang, "The Anthropological Value of Zhuang Xueben's Early Ethnographic Photographs," p. 26.

8. Xiao Liangzhong, "Zhenzhengde minzuzhi sheying" [True Ethnographic Photography], *Zhongguo sheying* [Chinese Photography] (February 2002), pp. 27–28.

This remarkable photograph was taken by Mr. S. T. Wang during his tour to the western China. Two women as shown here enjoying reading the Young Companion Magazine belong to the Lolo tribe, one of the fierce aboriginal tribes on the south-west borders of Szechuan Province. The Lolos are excluded from civilization, and are murderously cruel. The photographer has experienced much predicament before he could approach their chieftain and obtain his approval for photo-taking.

倮玀婦女

川且倮婦兩頭斂入奴役半拔兒常易族得。。。有至攝
邊雜女種種役日穴肩。不歲。食且生影談該因
未。所居常裏性。或敢。山物上地記而
開上白有讀族生血露尤人一有。攝權。者復川
化黑本骨有。性文極。跣行險冒冒故盜王威設得
之誌骨頭。野為冬足。境前亭無黑。
民所及常供皆。更道。骨轉氏
人馬時頭種以為野
傑。為白攝為。察然習單。者視民殺。頭得
。多族番。骨頭捻族番。番傑。

Zhuang Xueben. Yi Funeral. *1930s*.

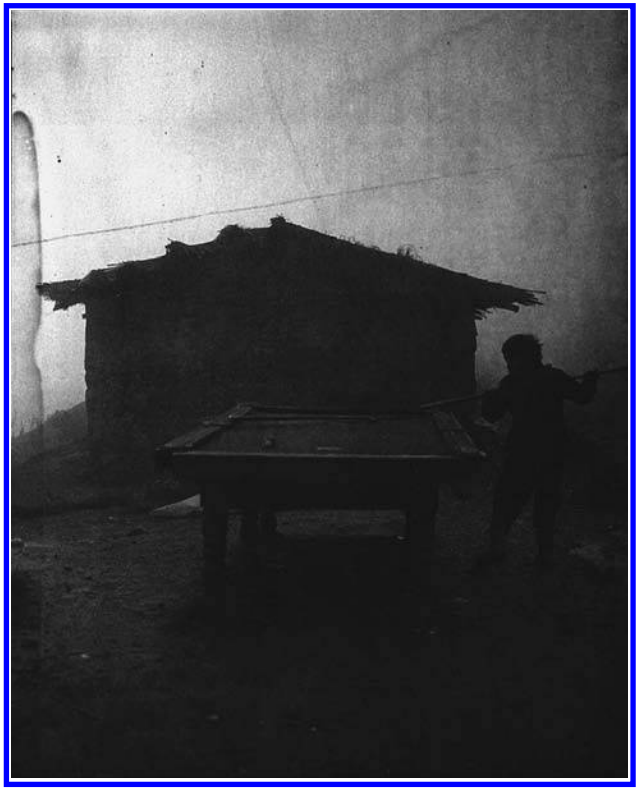
While Adou is aware of Zhuang Xueben's work and has pointed out the influence of documentary photography on *Samalada*, his photographs mark a clear departure from and even a refusal of ethnographic photography even as they seem to evoke it. Zhang Li, a curator at Three Shadows Gallery, claims that Adou's photographs "do not have the same significance as documentary photography," for his "scenes do not focus on the exotic customs or the living habits of an ethnic minority, but rather use almost random, bland [*pingdan*] compositions" and expired film—such as in a photograph of a boy playing billiards—to place "these people who live between mountains and rivers into a time and space with vital consciousness and historical feeling."[9] Indeed, for the most part, the artifacts of the Yi people that Adou represents in multiple photographs—seeming to take the place of the material culture of agriculture, housing, costume, and rituals that were the focus of multiple pictures in Zhuang Xueben's body of ethnographic photographs—are various forms of screen. In Adou's work, however, screens are more often seen in the context of photographs such as *Girl in Front of Backdrop*. Here embodying a compositional strategy similar to that of *Horse, Building*, the screen is both a backdrop framing a portrait of a girl and baby (a setup that evokes "scientific" photographs of ethnic "specimens") and a barrier blocking visual access to the environment of the Yi, even as that environment, represented by an indeterminate mass of light and shadow, appears to spill through an opening at the left edge of the backdrop.

But while Adou's compositional strategy is to picture a variety of screens, in all of his photographs the surface of the expired film itself functions as a screen. To be sure, one effect of Adou's deliberate use of expired film is to make his photographs from the early twenty-first century appear much older than they are. But

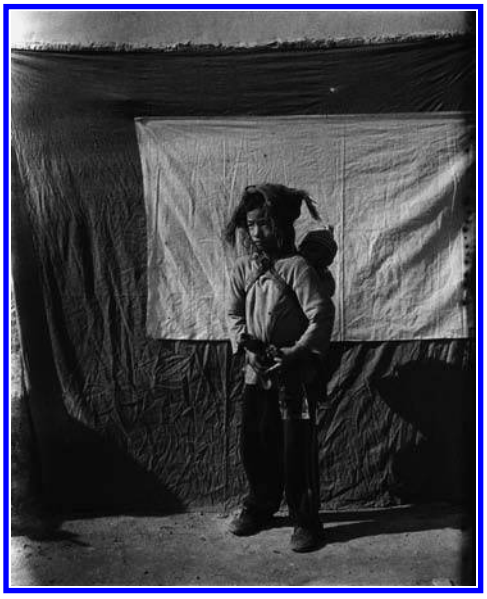
9. "A Round-Table Discussion on *Outward Expressions, Inward Reflections: Young Photographers Group Show*," in *Wai xiang / Outward Expressions, Inward Reflections*, p. 24/p. 53, and Zhang Li, "'Outer Expressions' of the Inner Self," pp. 7–8/p. 11.

their temporality becomes even stranger when we remember that Adou's use of expired film is, so to speak, a "post-digital" practice. As Zhang Li observes, Adou is one of a number of photographers who have rejected digital images for being "too clean, too perfect" and have instead "rediscovered the special qualities of film," drawing attention to its material properties.[10] The many blank spaces in Adou's photographs, as in the area of sky pictured in *Fog, Child, Pig*, actually consist of the opaque matter of the photographic emulsion and base made visible. It goes without saying that what one literally sees in any film photograph is the emulsion. But in an image like this, what is visible are the surface artifacts of the emulsion, such as streaks, mottling, and spots that signify decay and age; the details and information central to a conventional ethnographic photograph are precisely what are rendered opaque. While for Zhang Jianghua and Wang Zhaowu it is impermissible to manipulate an ethnographic photograph, Adou's use of expired film pushes their stricture to an extreme, allowing the surface of the film to take on a life of its own. Indeed, Adou cites the very unpredictability of expired film as

10. Ibid., p. 38/p. 68.



Adou. Boy and Billiards Table. *2006. Courtesy of M97 Gallery, Shanghai.*



Adou. Girl in Front of Backdrop. *2006. Courtesy of M97 Gallery, Shanghai.*

one of his reasons for using it. Contingency, accident, and unpredictability are the surfaces on which the lives, objects, and environments (built and natural) of the Yi people are screened—both in the sense of a surface on which representations are projected and in the sense of filtering those representations. Despite Adou's close proximity to the people, animals, objects, and spaces he photographs, the surfaces of the photographs attenuate the surfaces of much of what they represent. Indeed, one of Adou's complaints about "too clean" digital photographs is that they appear to be "too close" to him.[11] Of course, one can read Adou's aversion to proximity and cultivation of photographs that look old as a matter of removing his subjects from himself and his viewers in space and time—and indeed, Adou does invoke this possibility in some of his statements. And yet elsewhere, in what I believe to be a far more revealing statement, Adou refers to expired film as a "threshold" (*menkan*), a "little entry point, something to bring you inside."[12]

Adou's statement comes late in a roundtable discussion convened by Three Shadows in 2008 on the occasion of the exhibition *Wai Xiang*. This title, which literally means "external image" but in the exhibition catalogue is given the English translation "Outward Expressions, Inward Reflections," initially sets the terms for a discussion that primarily concerns the mediation of self, other, and nature by the camera and film. In an essay introducing the exhibition, the curator Zhang Li defines the term "outward" (*wai*) in terms of the turn by Adou and other photographers away from prevalent concerns in contemporary Chinese art with "the minutiae of everyday urban life" and toward images with which to "regard and ponder the world . . . outside or beyond the consciousness of humans."[13] For Zhang, this attempt to create images expressive of how humanity "cannot cast off

11. Ibid., p. 23/p. 52.

12. Ibid., p. 28/p. 57.

13. Zhang Li, "'Outer Expressions' of the Inner Self," p. 9/p. 13.

impermanence and randomness" and is "subordinate to nature" begins in the experience of how China's economic development is "dramatically increasing the disparity between its coastal regions and its hinterlands," with greatly differing "degrees of alienation caused by human-made environments."[14] And yet such images, Zhang asserts, "project [the artists'] innermost feelings and thoughts onto the outside world."[15] Zhang Li's claims inadvertently articulate the problem of coming to terms with the changing environment through images understood to be beyond human consciousness and subordinate to a larger nature, when his insistence on a clearly distinguished "interior" and "exterior" mediated by a relationship of projection seems to contradict such a conception of images. What Zhang Li's rhetoric indicates is the difficulty of conceptualizing images as part of a larger nature when thinking photography in such deeply dualistic terms.

Much of the discussion that ensues questions and gradually dismantles these distinctions between self and other, inner and outer, photographic images and natural world. Indeed, the first intervention by Rong Rong, co-founder of the Three Shadows Photography Centre, into the discussion is to shift the term "projection" to "refraction": "Actually," he says, "photography is also the refraction of one's innermost world by the lens."[16] Adou immediately picks up on this shift and redefines the "mode of looking outward"—or, later in the discussion, pointing a camera outward—as "refracting" one's self rather than projecting it.[17] While at this point both Rong Rong and Adou reiterate Zhang Li's dualism of inner and outer, their shift from projection, or, in Chinese, *toushe*, with its sense of "throwing" (*tou*), to refraction, *zheshe*, with its sense of "bending" (*zhe*), is a move away from an understanding of representation that assumes a transparency of the medium to one in which the medium itself bends or distorts those representations. For to refract is to bend light—by a lens, but also by the medium of water, or atmosphere, or mist or fog. To shift from projection to refraction is to shift from an understanding of representation centered on the self's relation to the world to one that recognizes the ways in which the environment itself affects the creation of the images that depict it.

Indeed, over the course of the discussion, the distinctions between self and other, external and internal, become increasingly blurred. While Adou interprets Zhang Li's idea of outwardness (*wai*) specifically in terms of the "natural world" (*ziran jie*), for a moment his statements about "great, open nature" where "people are really true" veer, as other participants in the discussion point out, between the narcissistic and the clichéd.[18] And yet, when Adou is subsequently asked about his

14. Ibid., p. 9/p. 13 and p. 7/p. 10.

15. Zhang Li, " 'Outer Expressions' of the Inner Self."

16. "Round-Table Discussion," p. 15/p. 44.

17. Ibid., p. 16/p. 44.

18. Ibid., p. 18/p. 46.

relationship to the Yi people he photographed and whether he feels he is "being brought into their world," or that their world is brought into his, Adou replies, "Sometimes I have a feeling of wavering, as if it's almost their world or perhaps my world. In the end I can't tell them apart . . . can't separate them, it's all mixed together."[19] At the same time, Adou's use of expired film stages a rethinking of the relations between the vibrant matter of film and the photographer's embodied self. As Adou puts it in his introduction to *Samalada*, "When you become part of the photograph, you do not need our shallow consciousness to impose itself upon [it]. . . . Your self is just a vassal of the photograph, dust beneath the light."[20]

The title of Adou's photograph *Fog, Child, Pig*, for instance, emphasizes the fog that nearly dissolves a pig into the featureless ground, as well as any distinguishing marks on the child to the right, and instead divides the ground of the image into lighter and darker areas of gray crossed by the diagonal horizon line (which itself threatens to dissipate to the left). This photograph does not represent the world, as the anthropologist Tim Ingold puts it, "as composed of mutually exclusive hemispheres of sky and earth, separated by the ground"; rather, it embodies what, in a discussion of ecological approaches to perception, he calls the "need to attend . . . to the fluxes of wind and weather. To feel the air and walk on the ground is not to make external, tactile contact with our surroundings but to mingle with them. In this mingling, as we live and breathe, the wind, light and moisture of the sky bind with the substances of the earth in the continual foraging of a way through the tangle of lifelines that comprise the land."[21] The mingling of human, animal, air, and earth in Adou's photograph, however, is not only created by the refraction and diffusion of light through a heavy atmospheric fog; that mingling is as much an interaction of the atmosphere and earth, human and animal forms and diffused light, with the expired film and its chemical fogging, as is most visible in the heavy vertical bands of light and dark that hang like the folds of a veil across the image.

The fogging in Adou's photograph, that is, makes visible to the viewer how the medium of film and the atmosphere it depicts are of a larger ecology. Indeed, as James Gibson suggested as a fundamental component of what he called an ecological approach to visual perception, the atmosphere itself might be defined as a medium. For Gibson, a medium is that "in which animals can move about (and in which objects can *be* moved about) [and] is at the same time the medium for light, sound, and odor coming from sources in the environment. . . . Instead of geometric points and lines . . . we have points of observation and lines of locomotion. As the observer moves from point to point, the optical information, the acoustical

19. Ibid., p. 19/p. 48.

20. Adou, *Samalada* (Beijing: Three Shadows Press, 2008), p. 5.

21. Tim Ingold, "Earth, Sky, Wind and Weather," in *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge, and Description* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 115.

information, and the chemical information change accordingly."[22] Another important characteristic of medium for Gibson is that, containing oxygen, it can be breathed, a "ceaseless chemical exchange of substance" between an organism and its environment.[23] Gibson intended for his ecological model of perception, which along with Ingold's work has informed Jiang Yuhui's recent phenomenological reconsideration of Chinese landscape painting, to break with a photographic model of visual perception in which "each fixation of the eye is analogous to an exposure of the film in a camera, so that what the brain gets is something like a sequence of snapshots." Instead, Gibson's ecological approach defines perception as a relationship between a body looking around and moving through space and the ambient light, texture, and surfaces of the natural and human-made world.[24]

It is telling, then, that over the course of the Three Shadows roundtable, Adou moves from describing his relationship to the environment of Liangshan, where he photographed *Samalada*, in terms of refraction to biological metaphor, highlighting the permeable sense of the body when he says, "The environment infected me."[25] When Adou first mentions his use of expired film, he does not describe it in terms of its capacity to represent (*zaixian*), but rather in terms of its capacity to "embody [*tixian*] through being a thing of the past."[26] And key to Adou's understanding of the relationship of photographic processes to the environment in terms of a continuum rather than as a dualism, in terms of embodiments rather than representation, is his rejection of "precision and control . . . things that you can predict," in favor of relying, through the use of expired film, on "instinct and nature to let things develop [or 'issue,' *fachu*]."[27]

The term Adou uses for "nature" or "naturally," *ziran er ran*, emphasizes the idea of nature as process, as that which takes its own course or becomes according to its own nature—much as the film surface in *Fog, Pig, Child* follows its own

22. James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (New York: Psychology Press, 2015), pp. 13–14. Gibson's theory is one of Ingold's touchstones throughout his own work.

23. Ibid., p. 14.

24. Ibid., p. xiv. For Gibson, ambient light is crucial to an ecological approach to perception because of the information it conveys through the complexity of its structure. Hence "the limiting case of ambient light *without* structure" would be "if the air were filled with such dense fog that the light could not reverberate between surfaces, but only between droplets or particles in the medium. . . . In the case of unstructured ambient light, an environment is not specified and no information *about* an environment is available. . . . Consider an observer with an eye at a point in a fog-filled medium. The receptors in the retina would be stimulated, and there would consequently be impulses in the fibers of the optic nerve. But the light entering the pupil of the eye would not be different in different directions; it would be unfocusable, and no image could be formed on the retina." Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, pp. 46–47. Adou's *Fog, Child, Pig* approaches such a limit of imageability.

25. "Round-Table Discussion," p. 25/p. 54.

26. Ibid., p. 23/p. 52.

27. Ibid., p. 27/p. 56.

course as a stain of decay grows in the sky at the upper right, or black blobs grow like corpuscles along the left edge. The expression *ziran er ran* emphasizes the dual meaning of *ziran* as both "nature" and "self-so."[28] This dual meaning of *ziran* is key to the foundational Daoist philosophical text, the *Daodejing* (fourth century BCE), whose claim that "the great image has no form" (*da xiang wu xing*) is invoked in passing during the Three Shadows roundtable. Just at the moment when the discussion shifts from projection to refraction, Adou comments that the Chinese term *xiang* (image or phenomenon or figure, or even figuration) connotes "a kind of thinking," to which another photographer, Lu Yanpeng, responds by quoting the phrase "The great image has no form." This phrase emerges out of the understanding of nature as a spontaneously "self-so" process of "way-making" (*dao*) explored throughout the *Daodejing*.[29] Such an understanding of reality as a ceaseless process of emergence in which, as the *Daodejing* puts it, "determinacy (*you*) and indeterminacy (*wu*) give rise to each other," a "process of way-making" that, "though vague and indefinite, [has] images [*you xiang*] within it," was, subsequently, fundamental to the aesthetics of Chinese landscape ink paintings, most recognizably, perhaps, of the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279 CE)—which, in turn, Adou's photograph *Fog, Child, Pig* evokes with its mingling forms of human, animal, earth, and atmosphere that at once emerge from and dissipate into its nearly indeterminate spaces.[30] François Jullien has demonstrated how key Chinese theoretical texts on painting have repeatedly drawn upon and reinterpreted two key terms from the *Daodejing* that appear in the passages I've just cited: "*you xiang*, what possesses a figuration, and *wu xing*, what has no form."[31] Chinese landscape painting, Jullien writes, "consists not of depicting and representing what is before one's eyes, perceiving it as a spectacle," but rather in "the figuration of a continuous transformation of forms," "surging up and fading away at the same time," a

28. Ibid., p. 16/p. 44. For an illuminating discussion of *ziran*, see *Dao De Jing: A Philosophical Translation*, trans. Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall (New York: Ballantine, 2004), pp. 68–71.

29. "Round-table Discussion," p. 16/p. 44. See *Daodejing: A Philosophical Translation*, pp. 115 and 141.

30. *Daodejing*, pp. 80 and 107.

31. François Jullien, *The Great Image Has No Form, or On the Nonobject through Painting*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 18. While Jullien's discussion constitutes a thought-provoking and productive survey of this aspect of Chinese painterly thinking, it must be read with great caution, as he needlessly disregards the disparate historical contexts of early Daoist texts, eleventh-century painting theory, and an early-eighteenth-century text by the painter Shitao, among others, and thus essentializes "the" Chinese painter. Jullien's anti-historical essentialism leads him to claim that "China did not know how, or was unable, to produce its own modernity," a claim that is difficult to comprehend in thinking of the complex and critically selective relationships of late Ming–early Qing painters like Dong Qichang and Shitao to multiple cultural pasts, as well as the rapid cultural, technological, economic, and social changes characteristic of that era of Chinese history. Jullien, *The Great Image Has No Form*, pp. 236 and 119. For an essential discussion, see Jonathan Hay, *Shitao: Painting and Modernity in Early Qing China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

process in which the agency of figuration was understood to be dispersed; or, as, for instance, the early-modern painter Shitao (1642–1707 CE) put it, "brush-stroke receives ink, ink receives brush, brush receives wrist, wrist receives mind, just as heaven initiates and earth carries through."[32] To be sure, understandings of the formation of images as emergent within larger processes and of agency have a long history in Chinese aesthetic and philosophical thought; the stakes of invoking and reinterpreting such understandings as modes of ecological thinking—whether in discourses such as the Three Shadows roundtable or Jiang Yuhui's phenomenological reinterpretation of Chinese landscape painting, or indeed in the pictorial practices of photographers such as Adou or Zhang Kechun—is a topic I shall explore in a future essay. Here suffice it to say that over the course of the conversation at the Three Shadows roundtable, Adou gradually relinquishes his agency to the spontaneous, self-organizing or "self-so" processes of nature as embodied in expired film and its relation to its environment. This is the sense Adou means when he declares, precisely at this moment in the discussion, that expired film is a "threshold," a "little entry point."[33]

Adou's understanding of photography as environmental or ecological, rather than as primarily representational, was informed not by Romanticism but, in part, it seems, by his interest in the Japanese photographer Moriyama Daido, who is known for his "grainy, blurry, out of focus" (*are, bure, boke*) images from the late 1960s and early 1970s.[34] The unpredictable, aleatory artifacts, such as mottles, blobs, and stains—marks in Moriyama's photographs of the exposure to harsh chemicals of the organic and mineral materials composing film surfaces—are as much a visible part of the Japanese photographer's work as his depictions of the relations among humans, animals, inanimate objects, and landscapes or cities of alienation and desire. The critic Minoru Shimizu interprets Moriyama's well-known style as an expression of "a kind of 'subtraction,' a means to erase the photographer's self, his thoughts, subjective expressions, and intentions. In other words, the photographs try not to see, not to think, and not to choose. As a result, they do not deliberately show something; rather, they 'emerge' showing some kind of alternative reality."[35] Indeed, Moriyama himself has described his practice

32. Jullien, *The Great Image Has No Form*, pp. 23, 203, and 2. I have slightly amended Jullien's rendering of Shitao's text in *The Great Image Has No Form*, p. 195. For a full translation, see Richard Strassberg, *Enlightening Remarks on Painting by Shih-t'ao* (Pasadena: Pacific Asia Museum, 1989), p. 66.

33. "Round-Table Discussion," p. 28/p. 57.

34. Adou expresses his admiration for Moriyama's photobooks in "Round-Table Discussion," p. 40/p. 71. Editions of Moriyama's photographs and translations of his essays and interviews are prominently displayed in bookshops in Beijing and elsewhere in China, as I saw during a research trip in May–June 2014.

35. Minoru Shimizu, "'Grainy, Blurry, Out-of-Focus': Daido Moriyama's *Farewell, Photography*," in *Daido Moriyama*, ed. Simon Baker (London: Tate Publishing, 2012), p. 60.

of photography as "a means of expressing a message that is both physiological and phenomenological. . . . One might say that I'm taking the pictures more with my body than with my eyes."[36]

In an untitled image from Moriyama's seminal photobook *Farewell, Photography* (Shashin yo sayonara) (1972), for instance, we see the forms of a building, car, and street in a nighttime urban landscape. The windows and right edge of the building are lit up in a garish fog of chemical developers, and to the left, the building melts away into a blaze of emulsion. The random figure in the image's center appears like a conflagration of liquid and fire, its white form twisting and folding into a shape suggestive both of a female body and a phallus, while the traces of wave upon wave of liquid chemicals across the photograph's surface seem to flood and melt away the urban street. In a 1970 essay theorizing images like this by Moriyama and other Japanese photographers in the Provoke group of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the critic Taki Kōji wrote that "in photography, all acts of expression are attempts to discover what real existence is by letting one's own body penetrate the elusive membrane of the phenomenal world. . . . [Expression] may simply be enabling us to constantly dissolve and fabricate what we see in front of us—the world itself—and push it out into the distance. . . . I think a photographer might have been the first to realize most clearly that the world exists beyond the self. The world is not equal to humanity, nor is it constituted by human consciousness. . . . The world is woven out of the totality of an antihuman or transhuman structure and the raw concreteness of individuals."[37] Such a transhuman structure could only be expressed, as Taki put it in a seeming paradox, by a photography that can provide "an adequately focused view" of the "amorphous, ever fluid world."[38]

The paradoxical relationship Taki's statement identifies between the focused view of the camera and the amorphous world has been at the heart of photography since its invention. Long before photography, of course, at least since the time of René Descartes, the camera itself has served as a convenient figure for a dispassionate, objectivizing separation of perception from all the sensual, shifting phenomena of the world. In his *Optics* (1637) and *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), Descartes used the structure of the camera obscura, at times explicitly and at others implicitly, as a figure for a "representational" model of perception and of the separation of

36. Daido Moriyama, "The Camera as a Means of Confirming the Self," quoted in *Daido Moriyama: Stray Dog*, ed. Sandra S. Phillips, Alexandra Munroe, and Daido Moriyama (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1999), p. 38.

37. Taki Kōji, "What Is Possible for Photography?," in *From Postwar to Postmodern: Art in Japan, 1945–1989—Primary Documents*, ed. Doryun Chong et al. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2012), pp. 215–17. Also see Miryam Sas, "The *Provoke* Era: New Languages of Japanese Photography," in *Experimental Arts in Postwar Japan: Moments of Encounter, Engagement, and Imagined Return* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2011), pp. 180–200.

38. Taki Kōji, "What Is Possible for Photography?," p. 217.

Adou. Child, Pig. *2006.*
Courtesy of M97 Gallery, Shanghai.

mind from nature and from world—the world, that is, perceived by means of representations or images projected from outside.[39] And yet, contrary to such oppositions between the camera and the natural world, the idea of photography as in part a natural process has quite literally defined it from the moment of its invention. Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, searching during the early nineteenth century for a name for the first photographic process he had invented, tried out a series of alternatives, each of which brought a different Greek term for a kind of image (e.g. *graphé*, *typos*, and *eikon*) into combination with the Greek word for nature, *phusis*.[40] Niépce's list of names, Joel Snyder observes, "suggests that unlike all other kinds of pictures (which are made by hand), photographs come into being through a doubling of causal agencies—by means of human activity and natural means."[41] For aside from the apparatus of camera and lens operated by human agency, the other half of photography, Niépce suggested, is *phusis*, which Descola has defined as "the principle according to which a being is what it is in itself: it develops according to its 'nature'"—a term whose meaning is very similar to the Chinese term *ziran*, which, as we've seen, Adou used to describe both the subject matter and processes of his own work.[42] Niépce's difficulty in naming photography identifies the paradox inherent to the medium: Photography—and particularly the camera—is a mechanism figuring a Cartesian separation of mind from world, human from nature, even as the processes by means of which a photo-sensitive surface forms images through exposure to light and development by chemistry are continuous with the processes of nature.

In a seminal and enigmatic essay, the Canadian photographer Jeff Wall has returned to this conundrum, reframing it as a "confrontation of . . . the 'liquid intelligence' of nature with the glassed-in and relatively 'dry' character of the institution of photography," and setting out the stakes of this confrontation.[43] By dry

39. See, for example, René Descartes, *Optics,* in *Selected Philosophical Writings*, translated and edited by John Cottingham et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 63–64.

40. Joel Snyder, "What Happens by Itself in Photography?," in *Pursuits of Reason: Essays in Honor of Stanley Cavell*, ed. Ted Cohen, Paul Guyer, and Hilary Putnam (Lubbock: Texas Tech University, 1993), p. 361.

41. Snyder, "What Happens by Itself in Photography?," p. 365. As Snyder asks: "Should we . . . understand 'physautype' as 'nature impressing itself,' or as 'a self-impression *of* nature,' or perhaps as 'self-impression *by* nature?'" (p. 361). See Terrence Deacon's discussion of the problems posed by the idea of "itself" as well as "self" in terms like "self-organizing" without recourse to attributing agency to a homunculus in his *Incomplete Nature: How Mind Emerged from Matter* (New York: Norton, 2013), pp. 46–106.

42. Descola observes that the meaning of *phusis*, or nature, is very similar to the Japanese term *shizen* (or, in Chinese, *ziran*). In a highly germane discussion, Descola goes on to claim that "*shizen* by no means covers the idea of a sphere of phenomena that are independent of human action, for in Japanese thought there is no place for a conscious objectivization of nature or for such a withdrawal of humanity from all that surrounds it. . . . Here, the environment should be taken literally: it is what links together and constitutes human beings as multiple expressions of a complex whole that is greater than them." Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, pp. 29–30.

43. Jeff Wall, "Photography and Liquid Intelligence," in *Selected Essays and Interviews* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2007), p. 109.

intelligence Wall means the optical and mechanical aspect of photography, such as the lens and shutter of both camera and enlarger—everything that is "calculable."[44] The meaning of "liquid intelligence" has proven more elusive.[45] Drawing together natural forces, their depiction in photography, and the materiality of the medium of film, Wall's term encompasses "complicated natural forms" with their "unpredictable contours," whether as depicted in photographs (such as the explosion of milk in one of Wall's most familiar photographs) or occurring in the natural world. But liquid intelligence also encompasses the essential roles "water plays . . . in the making of photographs," the "liquid chemicals" used in processing and developing film—that is, in "washing, bleaching, dissolving" film, presumably both its mineral component (the silver halide crystals whose darkening by light forms the image) and its vegetable component (the cellulose support whose opaque antihalation layer is dissolved and washed away when film is processed). Unlike the dry intelligence of photography that is both calculable and controllable, liquid intelligence is "unpredictable" and "incalculable"—indeed, water "has to be controlled exactly and cannot be permitted to spill over the spaces and moments mapped out for it in the [photographic] process, or the picture is ruined."[46]

Wall's essay makes plain the paradox that while the "modern vision" of the camera apparatus "has been separated to a great extent from the sense of immersion in the incalculable which I associate with 'liquid intelligence,'" film can only produce images if it is quite literally immersed in liquid during processing in the darkroom.[47] But is this really a paradox? Or rather, as Wall suggests, is the commonplace dualism between liquid and dry (or, to use his other term, optical) intelligence perhaps better understood as a relationship of emergence? That is, can the "dry" part of photography be understood differently if the photographic apparatus is seen not in opposition to nature but rather as "having emerged from the mineral and vegetable worlds," a "prehistorical" image of photography that the "echo of water" in photography evokes?[48] By insisting here that the liquid chemicals of photography and the fluidity of natural forms and processes are all modes of a larger liquid intelligence, Wall's argument situates photography within a wider ecology—even as a Cartesian understanding of photography's optical intelligence would dissociate photography from the ecology or nature from which it emerges, and which it displaces.

44. Ibid.

45. See, for instance, Kaja Silverman's discussion in *The Miracle of Analogy, or, The History of Photography, Part I* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), p. 67.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid.

The terms Moriyama, Shimizu Minoru, and Taki Kōji used to address this seeming paradox of photography—terms according to which photography is a means of expressing a message both physiological and phenomenological, photographs do not show but emerge, and the world itself is woven out of transhuman structures—are powerfully evocative of the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Key philosophical texts by Merleau-Ponty had been translated into Japanese over the course of the 1960s (*The Structure of Behavior* in 1964, "Eye and Mind" in 1966, and *Phenomenology of Perception* in 1967), and they explicitly informed art discourses in Japan at that time. More recently, in his 2013 reconsideration of Chinese painting and the picturing of landscape, Jiang Yuhui has returned to Merleau-Ponty's rethinking of dualisms of mind and world, body and perception. Crucial to artists and critics alike is Merleau-Ponty's development of an understanding of consciousness as emergent from and enactive with an environment, rather than a representational model in which a subject is divorced from the objects that it perceives by means of internalized representations, or one in which an external agent works on passive matter.[49]

At first glance, Merleau-Ponty's appeal to photographers might seem surprising. The philosopher frequently deployed the medium as a figure in his fierce critique of Cartesian dualism, arguing in his pivotal 1945 essay "Cézanne's Doubt," for example, that "the lived perspective, that of our perception, is not a geometric or photographic one," and questioning the idea of substituting "for our actual perception the schema of what we would have to see if we were cameras."[50] Yet in the same essay, Merleau-Ponty explicitly situates such a Cartesian mode of understanding photography in relation to environmental processes and the ways picture-making can engage with those processes. Merleau-Ponty differentiates Cézanne's discovery through the process of painting of "the lived perspective" from "a geometric or photographic" perspective in ways that anticipate how and why Moriyama and other photographers would reject a Cartesian understanding of "seeing as if we were cameras."[51] Merleau-Ponty's proposal that, as Jiang Yuhui puts it, the "core mystery of the unity" of embodied consciousness and world is revealed through "painterly expression"—namely, "the use of its unique artistic techniques to give appearance to 'the natural'/'taking-form' ['*ziran*'—'*chengxing*'] of the myriad phenomena of the world within the senses"—articulates the kind of understanding of image-making that Moriyama and, more recently, Adou would

49. For a discussion of this aspect of Merleau-Ponty's work, see Evan Thompson, *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 13, and chapter 4, "The Structure of Behavior."

50. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt," in *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, ed. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), pp. 73–74.

51. It is telling that Merleau-Ponty's bête noire in his essay is photography and not Italian Renaissance painting, whose geometric perspective cameras and their lenses were later designed to reproduce.

consider fundamental in their own work.[52] In the passage to which Jiang refers, Merleau-Ponty writes:

> [Cézanne] did not want to separate the stable things which appear before our gaze and their fleeting way of appearing. He wanted to paint matter as it takes on form, the birth of order through *spontaneous organization*. He makes a basic distinction not between "the senses" and "intelligence" but rather between the *spontaneous order of perceived things* and the human order of ideas and sciences. . . . Cézanne wanted to paint this primordial world, and this is why his pictures give us the impression of nature at its origin while photographs of the same landscapes suggest man's works, conveniences, and imminent presence. . . . The drawing [or delineation, *dessin*] must therefore result from the colors, if one wants the world to be rendered in its thickness. For the world is a mass without gaps, *an organism of colors* across which the receding perspective, the contours, the angles, and the curves are set up as lines of force; the spatial frame is constituted by vibrations [or, according to an earlier translation, "the spatial structure vibrates as it is formed"].[53]

Read in the context of the philosophy of form, organism, and consciousness delineated in *The Structure of Behavior*, this passage is remarkable for the ways in which Merleau-Ponty conceives of Cézanne's painting of nature in biological terms of matter taking on form, of "spontaneous organization," and of the world itself as "an organism of colors." Already at stake in Merleau-Ponty's discussion of Cézanne are fundamental questions to which he would return in his later work on nature.[54] What is at issue here, as Diana Coole puts it, "is whether nature is internally productive of itself—such that there is an immanent and irreducible relationship between creating and created that renders matter a lively process of self-formation—or whether matter is inert stuff that is worked upon by some immaterial force or agency external to it."[55] This opposition between ways of thinking nature also suggests two ways of thinking relations among artist, artwork, and world: Whether in terms of an artist as an external agent working on inert

52. Jiang, *Painting and Truth*, p. 34.

53. Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt," pp. 73–75, emphasis mine. The earlier, standard English translation (of which the translation I have been quoting is a revision) is in Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1961), p. 15. The Dreyfus translation glosses over the biological rhetoric (e.g., "organism of colors") of Merleau-Ponty's French text.

54. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*, compiled by Dominique Séglard, trans. Robert Vallier (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003).

55. Diana Coole, "The Inertia of Matter and the Generativity of Flesh," in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, Politics*, ed. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 97–98.

matter, or whether artist and artwork are mutually constituting as creating and created within larger natural and cultural processes. As Merleau-Ponty writes, "The image saturated itself, composed itself, drew itself, became balanced, it came to maturity all at once. 'The landscape thinks itself in me,' [Cézanne] said, 'and I am its consciousness.'"[56]

This conceptualization of the relations among artist, landscape, and the self-organizing processes of image formation is profoundly suggestive for developing a photographic ecology. Indeed, film photography, as the Provoke photographers of Japan or a number of the Chinese photographers exhibited at Three Shadows have practiced it, is the mode of representation that itself most explicitly stages the relations between culture and nature, not as a relationship of Cartesian dualism or separation but rather as one of emergence.[57] For Moriyama and Adou, among others, the world, to paraphrase Merleau-Ponty, is an organism of monochrome tonalities. And when Moriyama and Adou openly disavow in their verbal statements the centrality of their own agency in photographic processes, they are making explicit what their bodies of work explore: that to photograph is "to paint matter as it takes on form." Merleau-Ponty's phrase, I claim, has a double sense. "To paint matter as it takes on form" means making pictures that depict matter in the process of taking on form, such as the features of an ecosystem or landscape—or, in Adou's case, the form of a horse emerging from a decaying wall, or the forms of a child and a pig mingling with atmosphere and earth. But it also insists that the medium of photography itself might be understood as ecological rather than as primarily representational. According to this ecological model, the pictures that take form through photography are emergent from but not equivalent to the self-organizing processes of the silver salts clumped together because of the action of light, of the development by liquid chemicals, of the layers of gelatin and cellulose that constitute it and gradually decay, and of the natural and cultural environment of which the film and photographer and the landscape depicted are all a part.

In photography, in short, the work of forming images is situated at once within and beyond human agency and culture. Adou's use of expired film, in particular, makes apparent how photographic film is part of larger ecological processes. What expired film makes visible is that film is itself an ecology of animal, vegetable, and mineral matter: Its images are formed by silver halide crystals (mineral) suspended in gelatin (made from animal bones) and supported by a cellulose acetate base (made of vegetable matter).[58] And to be sure, any photographer working with film has always faced the unpredictability of photography's liquid

56. Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt," p. 77.

57. I explore these relationships further in my essay "The Life of Forms: From Zhang Jin to Aaron Siskind," *ASAS/Journal* 1, no. 3 (2016), pp. 461–86, and in the project of which it and the present essay are a part.

58. Edward Blasko et al., *The Book of Film Care*, Kodak Publication No. H-23, second edition (Rochester, NY: Eastman Kodak Company, 1992), p. 12.

intelligence, the problem of when to stop the processes of exposure and development once they have started, and the problem of controlling, as Wall puts it, "the spaces and moments mapped out" for water in the photographic process; but, as is made visible in the decay of the cellulose in Adou's photographs, film itself continues to process beyond human control.[59] A photograph, that is, is never really "still." It is merely a moment in an ongoing and unending process. Hence, by attending to the materiality of grain and bokeh and to the random marks and stains of liquid intelligence—much of that which makes an image "photographic"—the photographic practices I am describing here can be seen as not detached but emergent from or interacting with larger ecosystems composed of matter, objects, bodies, spaces, surfaces, and markings, the atmosphere, liquids, and light.

This ecological understanding of photography may help us to understand more clearly the turn of contemporary Chinese photographers such as Adou away from the digital (which Wall sees as an expansion of photography's dry part at the expense of liquid, altering "the historical consciousness of the medium"), and back to film as a mode of exploring and depicting the relations between nature and culture and the ecosystems of the past and the present.[60] But, as Wall's essay suggests, more is at stake here. The "ecological crisis" that Wall repeatedly invokes stems from a notion of photography that is grounded in a relationship to nature: The very concept of the liquid intelligence of photography, its self-organizing processes, and their relationships to photography's optical intelligence depend on ecology.[61] While a dualistic understanding of photography would separate the modern vision of the camera "from the sense of the immersion in the incalculable" that Wall associates with the liquid intelligence of nature, the consequences of this separation are manifest most clearly in the "form"—Wall's term—of the "ecological crisis."[62] Photography is emergent from natural processes and complicit in the domination of nature; it is complicit, as well, in the environmental degradation of the very natural processes from which it emerged.

Adou stages this complex relationship in a loose grouping of photographs that appear on a series of right-hand pages in the revised catalogue of *Samalada* produced by the M97 Gallery in Shanghai when Adou's work was exhibited there in 2013. The domination of nature by a modern optical apparatus (among others) appears most baldly in his photograph *Electronics*. Here the screen of a television appears to look out over the landscape of Liangshan rather than appearing as a

59. Wall, "Photography and Liquid Intelligence," p. 109.

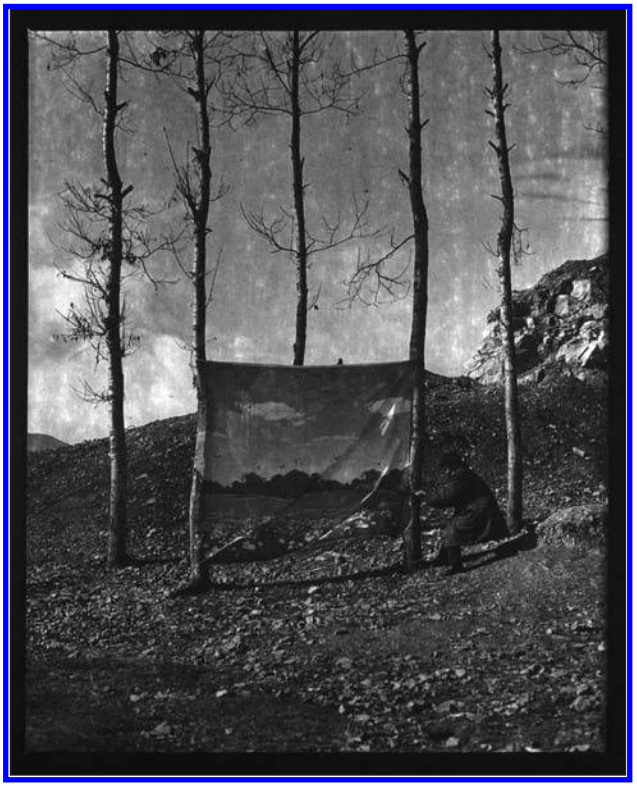
60. Ibid., p. 110.

61. Ibid. As Wall opines, "the whole construct, the whole apparatus and institution of photography is of course emblematic of the technological and ecological dilemma in relation to nature." It is striking how Wall's repeated reference to the ecological in his essay seems to have gone unremarked by commentators.

62. Ibid., p. 110.

surface through which to look; indeed, its single opaque eye seems to survey its surroundings with a commanding gaze that extends beyond the frame of the photograph, while the plastic layers of discarded CDs, videotapes, and electronic trash conceal and defile the ground beneath it. And yet there is something anomalous about this photograph: As the only image in *Samalada* depicting modern communications technologies, the photograph appears both striking and as strikingly out of place in the book as those apparatuses appear in the landscape they dominate—even as the entire image is, oddly, both sharply in focus and slightly dissolved by the textures of the expired film. Indeed, this relationship between optical apparatus and the natural world is, so to speak, turned inside out in *Photographer*, the image that precedes *Electronics* in the M97 catalogue. Here, any depiction of an optical apparatus has entirely disappeared. Instead, a representation of a landscape is both situated within and doubles the landscape of cloudy sky and barren ground strewn with pebbles surrounding it in the form of a painted backdrop a photographer is tying to two trees. On closer inspection, however, we find that the backdrop is not only immersed within the wider landscape but appears to replicate the surface of the expired film of which the entire image is constituted, the stains and faded patches on the backdrop echoing the mottling of the film visible across the sky, while the banded markings on the film at the upper right seem to reappear as the folds slanting across the cloth of the backdrop.

Adou. Electronics. *2006*.
Courtesy of M97 Gallery, Shanghai.



Adou. Photographer. *2006*.
Courtesy of M97 Gallery, Shanghai.

Nature is screened by its own depiction within the photograph, even as that depiction appears to be dissolving into the natural substances of which the photograph is made. Indeed, the sky of the photograph appears to be even more mottled, marked, and spotted than the surface of the backdrop, making, as is the case in *Electronics*, the immaterial space of the sky into an opaque and material surface. Both photographs are so visibly immersed in and constituted by the living matter of the gelatin emulsion and cellulose film support that the film's organic materials seem to continue to breathe, both inspiring and expiring. It is when film expires that its visible life begins, and it is this very expiration of film that inspires Adou to treat it as living matter—a visible ecology of animal, vegetable, and mineral matter that is Adou's medium for exploring relationships of humans and nature.

What, then, does it mean at present to be part of an ecosystem, part of—and not external to or dominating—the natural world? Or, more specifically, what can

this rethinking of photography as primarily ecological, not representational, tell us of what it means to be part of an ecosystem? How might a photograph "embody," to use Adou's term, what Taki Kōji had called the transhuman structure out of which the world is woven? For Adou and his contemporaries, this is a question open to ongoing exploration. And while it is posed throughout *Samalada*, it appears most vividly in the sequence that begins with *Photographer* and *Electronics* and leads to three of the strangest images in *Samalada*, and with which I shall leave the reader. *Man, Woman, Curtain*, which follows *Electronics*, presents another screen, albeit at first glance one void of any reference to landscape, or indeed any apparent connection to the landscape in which it appears. The plane

Adou. Man, Woman, Curtain. *2006.*
Courtesy of M97 Gallery, Shanghai.

on which the photograph is focused, which renders the figures identified in the photograph's title as sharply as possible while leaving the rocky ground an increasing blur as it reaches forward to the camera and the picture plane, is a mark of the precise calculation of photography's optical intelligence—marks, that is, of Adou's choices in manipulating the lens and aperture. But what was utterly incalculable at the time of exposure was how the rounded, draping form of the curtain would rhyme with a similarly shaped stain in the emulsion at the upper right, as well as with another such patch on the ground at the center of the image that appears to be light cast upon the earth—until one realizes the patch continues in

an oval shape up and across the curtain and into the sky, revealing it to be yet another artifact of the expired film. These stains, with their unpredictable contours, are quite literally the marks of where Adou's agency as a photographer is immersed in the agency of the liquid intelligence of the film.

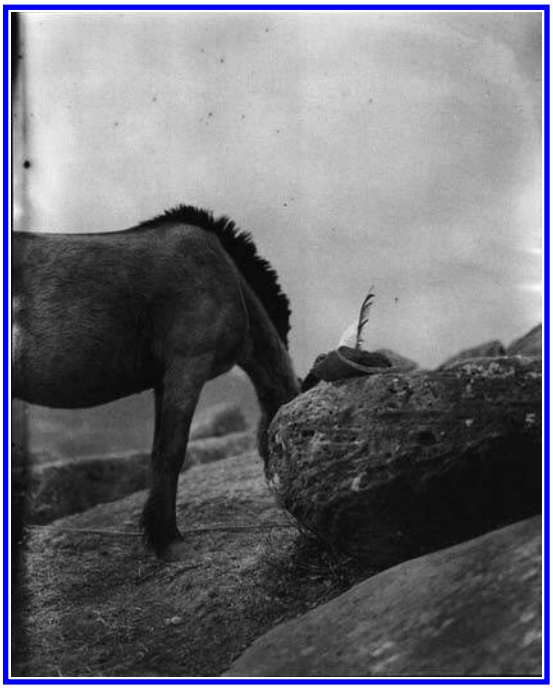
As almost all of Adou's photographs make visible, this "echo of water" seen so clearly in *Man, Woman, Curtain* evokes not only the liquid chemicals used in processing film but also the "mineral and vegetable"—and, indeed, animal—worlds from which the photograph has emerged. In *Person Under Curtain*, which follows *Man, Woman, Curtain* in the sequence, the screen, now moved closer to parallel the picture plane, is removed from any apparent use or function in its environment even as its

Adou. Person Under Curtain. *2006.*
Courtesy of M97 Gallery, Shanghai.

translucence both blocks and allows the viewer's access to that environment while dark marks drape across the upper edge of the photograph like bunting paralleling the curtain. Most strikingly enigmatic, however, is the way one corner of the curtain so precisely replaces the head and face of the standing figure, forming a transhuman assemblage of body and screen. Indeed, the curtain, with dimly discernible landscape and truck both screened out and screened through it, seems to emanate and flow from the figure's body as if what might have been thought to be a representation of the world brought within the interior of the figure's head were instead unfurled as a surface of that world—a "threshold," in Adou's terms, on which the figure and its environment and the viewer and the photograph "waver." This transhuman structure

of body, screen, and environment is restaged elsewhere in *Samalada* in the photograph *Horse and Chicken Tail* as what might be called a trans-animal structure that, because of the placement of the camera, combines a horse's body with a boulder for a head crowned by a chicken feather and a feathery white streak on the photograph's surface. Because of its composition, the photograph estranges the horse from its "natural" form even as it creates a combination of horse, stone, feather, and the grass growing around the boulder on which the horse is presumably feeding, as unlikely as the combination of plant cellulose, bones and tendons, and silver nitrate that compose the matter of the photograph.[63] If such photographs do not "naturalize" their human or animal subjects and their relationships to their environment, they do trouble one's understanding of what constitutes an ecosystem. At this moment of environmental degradation, Adou's photographs define an ecological aesthetic not as harmonious but as an aesthetic of connection and disjuncture and mingling of elements, in which to inhabit an environment is shown to be an ongoing process of being shaped by and emerging from that environment and struggling with it to take form.

63. On the "unlikely combination[s] of ingredients" from which "materials in common use are derived," see Ingold, "Materials Against Materiality," in *Being Alive,* pp. 24–25.



Adou. Horse and Chicken Tail. *2006.*
Courtesy of M97 Gallery, Shanghai.